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Use of Small Groups in Instructional Evaluation

D. JOSEPH CLARK and JEAN BEKEY

The Biology Learning Resource Center (BLRC) at the University of Washington has been supporting faculty in instructional improvement for the past five years. In the summer of 1977 consultants from the BLRC began a structured system of intervention following the clinic model developed at the University of Massachusetts by Melnik and Allen (Bergquist and Phillips, 1977). An essential feature of the Clinic model is feedback from students, as well as from the consultant. Consultants observe typical classroom sessions, videotape instruction, administer questionnaires to students and conduct student interviews to develop a profile of teaching, including strengths and weaknesses. Information derived from students has proved invaluable; however, both questionnaires and interviews have serious disadvantages. The first provides quantifiable data but is limited by the scope of items included and may not anticipate student needs. The second provides more adequate data but at a very high cost. An alternative method of ascertaining student perceptions, which we claim overcomes some of the above problems, is the small group evaluation, in which large classes are divided into smaller units that discuss the course according to a structured process and subsequently share their perceptions with the entire class. Results have been encouraging to date, and the method, while still experimental, appears flexible and economical. We wish to describe the process here.

By prior agreement, and without notice to students, a consultant joins the instructor during a regularly scheduled class session. The instructor introduces the consultant and explains to the class his/her own desire to improve instruction and that the consultant has come at his/her request. After the instructor leaves the room, the con-

sultant asks the class to provide information which will be used to identify and meet their particular learning needs. The consultant explains that participation is voluntary and anonymous and also indicates respect for the instructor's wish to improve instruction and the importance of each individual in the planning process. He/she then assures students that their feedback will be conveyed to the instructor. Students are asked to form groups of approximately six, preferably with classmates they do not know well. When the groups have formed, the following instructions are given orally and written on the blackboard or overhead projector.

Your group will meet for 10 minutes. During those 10 minutes your group is to do the following:

1. Select a leader/spokesperson.
2. Agree upon something you like in the course.
3. Agree upon something you would like to have changed in the course.
4. Suggest a strategy for improving the course.

Time will be up at —.

When time is up the class is asked to reconvene as a single unit. Small groups are polled and as each spokesperson reports group outcomes, these are listed on the blackboard or overhead projector. If a clear consensus becomes apparent, the consultant may ask for other opinions to either verify the consensus or to identify other views. The consultant summarizes the results, emphasizing themes and patterns and relating the suggestions to the realities of that particular course. If time remains, individual comments may be solicited. Time anticipated for the entire process is 30 minutes, even in large lecture classes. Before leaving the room, the consultant records all group outcomes and erases the blackboard or overhead.

There is empirical support for most of the procedures outlined above. Group process has long been a recognized format in both teaching and therapy. While Olmstead (Olmstead, 1974) provides guidelines for discussion groups as a teaching technique, most literature refers to therapeutic applications of group work. Evaluation groups are unique in that they meet briefly and for a very limited purpose. Their sole objective is to elicit honest feedback from students in a manner that facilitates learning and course improvement. An attempt has been made to identify the parameters which influence such time and task limited group interaction, and the follow-

ing have been noted in current literature: group size, cognitive structure, pacing, and leadership.

A serious concern is whether the groups we used for feedback and evaluation provided reliable information especially since Asch (Asch in Maccoby et. al., 1958) has demonstrated that social influence can operate within groups. However, in Asch's studies, the subjects were exposed to extreme conditions. Each subject was placed in a group with six confederates who gave false information when asked to judge the length of a line. Under these conditions, 32% of the subjects' responses were conforming. When two true subjects were placed in each group, however, the rate of conforming dropped to 10.4 percent. It is important to note that Asch's confederates formed a consistent majority whose responses were predetermined, not themselves subject to social pressure, and exerted a concerted influence on subjects. In six-member course evaluation groups, no such power block exists. Members all function as individuals and whatever group pressure may develop is more equally distributed. Johnson, Stemler and Hunter (Johnson et. al., 1977) have described a group polarization known as the "risky shift," by which the group is found to espouse a more extreme position than its members did as individuals. That is, a group of essentially conservative members becomes more conservative, while a group of liberal individuals forms a more liberal collective (Myers and Lamm, 1976). Johnson and associates investigated the "risky shift," using a group of six to eight college students, and found that while the measurable shift was statistically significant, it was very small, representing a change of 0.5 on a seven point scale. Since students in evaluation groups are asked to identify common concerns, but not to quantify them, it is difficult to see how the "risky shift," which is slight in any case, could alter the group outcomes. Group reliability is also supported by our observations of the strong tendency of isolated groups to reach similar findings. In summary, we see no reason to mistrust feedback because it was derived in groups.

As a further protection against social influence, students are asked to join with classmates with whom they are not well acquainted. Keating and Snowball (Keating and Snowball, 1977), who investigated the effects of personalization in groups of nine to twelve college women where members were known by name, found personalized groups were less friendly and involved greater task frustration. They also found that low density groups were considered

more helpful, cooperative, and understanding. Since task completion is important to group satisfaction, as reported by Heslin and Dunphy (Heslin and Dunphy, 1967), and it is important that all members contribute actively to the feedback process, group size has been set at six. Interestingly, Olmstead, in his discussion of "Buzz Sessions," which are brief and task-oriented, also considers six an optimal group size.

The 10-minute limit for group evaluation is also supported by Olmstead. The imposition of a time limit enhances the task orientation and increases the involvement of members. Brehmer (Brehmer, 1976) studied subjects in laboratory-induced interpersonal conflicts and found that when subjects were allowed as many as 20 negotiation trials, their conflicts were not reduced because their individual responses became inconsistent. Groups seem able to reach agreement within the allotted time, and it appears unlikely that an extension would alter outcomes, although it might reduce satisfaction.

A significant number of students express their negativity toward teaching evaluation by refusing to complete the standardized student evaluation forms and, in some cases, actually leave the room. Because these students may well have strong feelings about the course, and thus might not attend if forewarned, the class is not given notice prior to the small group evaluation sessions. A related potential problem, which has not been investigated, is that preprocessing out of class might bias opinions expressed by some of the class members when the small groups meet.

Glidewell (Glidewell in Beane et. al., 1975) has noted that in leaderless groups, more time and energy are devoted to structure and orientation as opposed to task. He considers it the right of group members to receive clear instructions and explanations. Cognitive structure, which is important in the early stages of group development (Bednar and Battersby), would appear crucial in a group whose duration is limited to ten minutes. In one case in which our instructions were poorly understood by members of an evaluation group, the members expressed confusion and frustration. This is consistent with Heslin and Dunphy's statement that reducing task ambiguity increases group satisfaction. Our instructions to small groups were designed to resolve status conflicts by establishing early leadership and to provide clear task definition. Instructions numbered 2, 3, and 4 were derived from Simon's values clarification

system (Simon, 1978); they were intended to facilitate a positive attitude among students toward themselves, the course, and the evaluation process. By maintaining an open and non-judgmental attitude toward students' responses and valuing their comments, the facilitator models for students a positive attitude toward change.

The small group evaluation method has been applied in lecture and conference settings with positive results. Some obvious advantages of the approach are the positive attitude of learners when compared with pencil and paper evaluation; the specificity of information obtained; the filtering of criticism, which provides the consultant with a manageable amount of feedback; and the brief time required to conduct the evaluation.

The positive attitude of students toward participating in the procedure was demonstrated by their response to our evaluation instrument. Students in classes which were evaluated at the midterm using small groups were asked in a course-end evaluation questionnaire, "Did you find the class evaluation with the consultant useful? Yes — No —." Of the 186 students who completed the item, approximately 4 out of 5 answered "Yes." In a class where feedback was provided to the instructor using student interviews, videotaped lectures, mid-term student ratings, small group evaluation, and observation by an outside consultant, students who believed that instruction had improved ranked small group evaluation above all other forms of evaluation as the source of improvement. This enthusiasm is probably due to the active participation of group members, first through verbal interaction with peers in units which allow everyone to be heard; later in the larger group where they can compare their impressions with those of others. This instant feedback allows consensual validation (Ruch and Zimbardo, 1971); confirmation of one's views is comforting, while a consensus contrary to one's views may prompt a serious reassessment of the individual's conclusions. Since the evaluation is conducted in an accepting atmosphere, ideas are reinforced by the simple process of independent discovery of similar results, and differing opinions are recognized expressions of individuality. In addition, differing opinions evolving from independent groups provide a strong message to the participants that group needs may vary widely and that course design may not be able to accommodate all needs and points of view simultaneously.

In an additional test of the method's validity, the information gained through small group process was compared with results of individual interviews and standard student assessment forms. Although student interviews yielded some individual nuances and impressions, the major ideas and common themes were identical in each case. Responses obtained from interviews but not expressed in small groups were held by a small minority and represented problems to which the instructor probably could not respond. We believe that a strong argument can be mounted for significant minority opinions and that important data can theoretically be lost in the group consensus. Acknowledging that the process may miss hidden gems of information, results to date in five classes have provided no specific examples. The group process outcomes clearly yielded more specific information than student rating forms. Strategies for improvement recommended by students help to clarify the weaknesses to which they refer while providing directive input.

Some other perception of how to best conduct the sessions can be given. Clearly, the small group process does filter extraneous comments and provide the implementor with the most significant problems which participants can identify. Generally, two to four significant comments emerge which are shared by the collective. Examples might include: lack of coordination between course components, boring lectures, insufficient resource material, or too much material. In large classes, which contain many small groups, the important themes are generally expressed by the first four or five groups. The redundancy which results emphasizes that there is agreement among groups and that those points expressed are shared by the group as a whole. While an invitation to the rest of the class for additional comments has produced few to date, it might help maintain open communication. Because the emerging course criticism is limited and focused, the instructor is in a good position to respond. Feedback which is clear and directive seems superior to rating form results, which can only indicate areas of student dissatisfaction and may leave the instructor confused as to where to shore up, excise, patch, repair, or revise.

It seems important for the facilitator to summarize the remarks made by the groups, indicating areas of consensus as well as disagreement, and to verify with students the messages intended before

reporting back to the instructor. The facilitator is also in a position to provide responsible direction should students indicate unrealistic expectations. For example, the group may make suggestions which are unrealistic because of physical plant constraints, limited resources, or reasonable personal limitations which are not apparent to those lacking teaching experience. As a third and neutral party, the facilitator can provide perspective on a situation which might otherwise lead to hostility toward the instructor for not implementing suggestions which represent unrealistic group expectations. The addition of a more realistic perspective furnished by a third party can be significant in facilitating goodwill and a positive atmosphere within which to accomplish changes more readily.

Finally, the element of time is important in considering the value of this approach to instructional assessment. The time allotted for groups to reach consensus on the three issues is intentionally short, causing participants to become task oriented, yet sufficient for almost all groups to complete the task. The total process need take no more than 30 minutes. This is approximately equivalent to the time required to administer a student rating form with an additional sheet for open-ended comments. However, the results are instantly available!

The small group process has been described as a formative technique. In that context we see a heightening of students' commitment, presumably because they are involved in a process which will directly affect and benefit them as the course progresses. It can also be used at the close of a course or conference. In this situation, it provides final evaluation for the instructor and a closure exercise for the participants. The process helps learners to both structure and summarize their learning experience. When participants share their views in a positive atmosphere at the end of a conference, enthusiasm seems to build. As the conference is reviewed, attention focuses on what has been learned and participants seem to be energized toward the application of their newly attained skills.

Third party intervention seems to be well received by participants. Use of a third party facilitator has apparent advantages. Students who were questioned said they find it easier to be candid with a third party. In two cases instructors conducted their own group evaluations, and both were successful, though intuition suggests the

possibility of instructor discomfort and defensive responding. Interviews with the two instructors confirmed their feelings of defensiveness and their recognition that open acceptance must be maintained to elicit honest feedback from students. Students did respond favorably to the presence of the instructor, which they saw as a guarantee that the instructor would hear their comments. The pros and cons of direct instructor implementation need further study. Another area which needs investigation is the effect on students of evaluation when the instructor does not implement change.

Settings in which small groups have been used for evaluation have involved from 30 to 120 participants and included both faculty and students. Inevitably, each new application raises new questions. Class size seems to be an important variable, but the effective maximum and minimum have not been established. While data generated from groups seem to be qualitatively complete, whether they can be quantified to facilitate performance review and how they should be documented have not been determined. Subjects taught in the life sciences are relatively concrete; would small group evaluation be as effective in subjects which are equally abstract, such as philosophy? The sooner evaluation is accomplished, the sooner new teaching strategies can be implemented; how much exposure time do students need in class before they can provide meaningful feedback? The optimal evaluation time is not known and may vary. A decision was made not to use small groups in a class of twelve which included individuals vocally opposed to course assessment. No doubt, there are other instances in which the method is inadvisable, but they have not all been identified.

All these topics, and no doubt many more, deserve research. Progress has been made by the development of a standard format for group evaluation. More experience will help define the consultant behaviors which are facilitative and the effective limits of small groups. In the meantime, small groups are providing useful and reliable data at a minimum cost and in a variety of settings. We hope that this article will stimulate others to apply the small group method and would like to act as a clearing house for data which can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of small group evaluation. The authors would be pleased to correspond with others using or considering the use of small groups in the evaluative process.

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